

New York City teachers' union collaborates in assault on education

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Starting this month, New York City's Department of Education (DOE), at the behest of the city's billionaire mayor, will close 24 schools labeled as "failing." The entire teaching staffs of these schools will be fired. By law, only half can be rehired in new schools that will replace those that have been closed. Known as the "turnaround" model, this destructive procedure is presented as a means of improving the quality of teaching.

The immediate goal of the closings is to restore \$58 million in federal funds from the Obama administration's Race to the Top program (RTTT). The funds had been revoked because of the failure of the DOE and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the organization that bargains on behalf of city teachers, to meet a deadline for an agreement on RTTT's required teacher evaluations, which is based on student standardized test scores.

The use of such evaluations to undermine the jobs of teachers was highlighted earlier this year when Mayor Michael Bloomberg released individual evaluation scores for 18,000 teachers based on student testing to the mass media.

Bloomberg has closed 140 comprehensive schools in the last 10 years and opened 589 small schools without adding to the city's capital expenses, mostly by co-locating into the same facilities. Of these new schools, 136 are publicly funded but privately owned charter schools. Of 54 new schools to be opened next school year, 25 are to be charter schools.

The turnaround operation is a thinly veiled assault on the legal job protections of senior teachers by closing the schools one day and reopening them the next under a new name.

An estimated 1,000 teachers dismissed from the turnaround schools who do not find jobs in new schools

could wind up in a pool known as Absent Teacher Reserves (ATR), from which they are assigned as substitutes to a new school each week.

As a result of previous closings, 2,000 teachers began this school year in the ATR. A large portion of the ATRs comprises experienced teachers whose higher salaries prevent principals with decreasing school budgets from hiring them. The UFT claims the number of ATRs has decreased to 800. If accurate, the figure is likely due to teachers quitting in despair over the destruction of their careers.

The entire closing process this year has once again demonstrated the close collaboration of the UFT with the Obama administration and the city's billionaire-in-chief to destroy the economic and social rights of teachers.

In spite of repeated student walkouts at closing schools and protests by parents, teachers and students, this right-wing organization refused to organize a struggle of any sort against the closings, mobilizing only a tiny fraction of its membership to protest in front of City Hall as a "boycott" of the official DOE public hearings on the school closings.

In a grotesque display of hostility to its membership, the UFT instructed chapter leaders in an e-mail regarding job postings from the turnaround schools to "share this information with your members who may be interested in applying to any of the new schools." The UFT will also be represented on the committees that will select which teachers are to be rehired when the "closed" schools are reopened under new names.

The UFT now has contracts for teachers in 17 charters—three of them established by the union itself—with separate wage and hour settlements from regular public school teachers. The UFT has allowed lower-paid non-union charter teachers to work

alongside UFT teachers.

The UFT is trying to mask its complicity in the destruction of teacher jobs by asking for a temporary injunction from the courts on the grounds that the closings constitute a contract violation. The case revolves around the UFT claim that the turnaround method does not in fact create new schools, while the city claims it is following both the contract procedure for hiring teachers and the regulations that come under Obama's turnaround plan.

In a similar court action over DOE plans to close 19 schools in 2010, the UFT won a legal victory only to have the DOE phase out 22 schools once the technical requirements of holding hearings were met.

In this election year, UFT president Michael Mulgrew defends the union's strategy of orienting to the Democratic Party with the claim that UFT lobbying resulted in the restoration of 1,000 or 2,000 positions. This figure ignores the deficit of 8,000 teaching positions, at a time when school enrollment has grown.

Budget cuts are still planned for 14,000 child daycare slots, on top of 16,000 cut since 2006. Half the families to be affected have incomes below \$32,000 a year. In addition, after-school programs face losing seats for 33,500 students. This will not only increase the financial desperation and family stress of parents and teachers, but will make the sound and creative educational development of children nearly impossible.

The number of teaching positions in the US's largest school district has in fact decreased by 10,000 from more than 80,000 since 2007. The UFT is again facilitating the attacks on the needs of students by negotiating pension buyouts of experienced teachers when an increase in the number of teachers and schools is a vital requirement.

Although the UFT leadership supported Bloomberg's successful 2003 demand to the New York State legislature to obtain total mayoral control over education in the city, Mulgrew has tried to divert growing anger among teachers, parents and students at the current state of education solely against mayoral control of the schools.

Fearing that almost any sort of citywide rally will expose how disillusioned teachers are with UFT strategy, school chapter leaders have been told to organize rallies only at their schools for a UFT Day of Action "to show the Bloomberg administration that you

are fed up with its decade of education disaster."

The corporate elite want the implementation of the misnamed "school reforms" in New York City stepped up. Charter-school advocate Michelle Rhee, who was forced to resign as Washington, D.C., schools chancellor after imposing major attacks on the city's public schools (with the cooperation of the American Federation of Teachers, the parent organization of the UFT), has begun a New York branch of her national organization, Students First.

Led by Micah Lasher, who left his job as the director of state legislative affairs for Bloomberg, Students First is raising \$50 million from the wealthy elite who have been backing charter schools to buy votes of state and city politicians.

In turn, a coalition of unions and community organizations that revolve around the Democrats has organized New Yorkers for Great Public Schools. The UFT has taken to making a call entirely without meaning or content for schools to be transformed into "community learning centers" where students and parents can find needed support in their local schools.

Teachers cannot find a way of defending their rights and the right to public education within the current trade union and political setup. A genuine struggle requires the organization of rank-and-file committees that are politically and organizationally independent of the UFT. These committees must fight for occupations and strike action against further school closings and demand the reversal of all closures and charter-school privatization. Such actions can only be successful if these committees set a goal of uniting all workers in the city in joint industrial action and a united mass political movement opposed to the profit system and its representatives in the city's Democratic Party apparatus, into which the UFT is fully integrated.



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